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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines purposes of program evaluation and provides practical information to help individuals from a wide spectrum of backgrounds use evaluation to move their program ahead in a purposeful manner. Wisely moving ahead requires an assessment of an organization's past and present as well as an examination of its assumptions about the future. A program evaluation can address these areas and inform planning. Defined as the systematic "formal" assessment of a program's quality and effectiveness, evaluation should both point out program weaknesses and highlight strengths. Determining and communicating the main purpose of a program review is essential to evaluation effectiveness. Some purposes for a program review are categorized under accountability, program improvement, and information dissemination. Various models outline the large scale methods of program evaluation. Smaller scale methods, or data gathering tools, are listed. The outcome of any review is affected, not only by its purpose, but also by who conducts the review and who the intended consumers are. Potential roadblocks and problems are identified and listed, and a sample timeline is provided. Terms of reference are data gathering guidelines that provide agreed-upon parameters for the review process. A sample set of terms of reference drawn from a school's outdoor physical education program covers program dimensions, planning, balance, instructional strategies, student evaluation, intramural activities, professional development, and work environment. Eight program review tips and strategies are provided. (SV)

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Moving Ahead: Program Review & Evaluation as Tools for Growth

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Abstract—This paper reviews the need for program evaluation. It discusses methods, evaluation, data gathering tools, and evaluation timelines.

"The primary purpose of evaluation is not to prove but to improve"
Stufflebeam & Guba

"The educational innovator usually has to design an evaluation without much professional advice, conduct it with limited resources, and defend it without the advantage of comparisons to conventional approaches that have been similarly evaluated."
S. Hamilton
Evaluating Your Own Program

Introduction

Program evaluation is an often delicate and intimidating subject. It is viewed by many as something that someone else does to them. The goal of this article is twofold; firstly, to provide a brief background regarding the various purposes and methods that evaluation can serve, and secondly, but most importantly, to provide practical information and experience to help individuals from a wide spectrum of backgrounds use evaluation as a means to move their organizations ahead in a purposeful manner.

Wisely moving ahead requires an assessment of an organization's past and present as well as an examination of their assumptions regarding the future. A program evaluation can help address such questions and consequently inform planning so that it is based on what has been discovered, what has been confirmed and what is anticipated. Service is what good evaluation is about. A well constructed and conducted evaluation is a service to the organization, its stakeholder and its clients. Evaluation serves the needs of a program by providing information that is useful for making practical choices regarding quality and effectiveness.

My goal in this article is <u>not</u> to provide a crash course in research-oriented educational evaluation but to provide tools, insights and resources that can help you develop and conduct a program review

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that is thorough, realistic and usable.

What is Evaluation

Evaluation has a long history. From time immemorial people have judged the quality and effectiveness of all sorts of things and experiences. Based upon their judgment they have assigned value or worth. Methods of hunting, ways of treating illnesses and injuries, training for sport, approaches to human interaction, art and wilderness leadership have all been hot topics of debate. Formal or informal methods of evaluation have often been relied on to support one position or another.

Charting the Future; Program Review & Evaluation as Tools for Growth

Today we talk of evaluating outdoor leaders as a prerequisite to giving them a stamp of approval, such a certification. Such behavior is hardly new. Over 4,000 years ago the Chinese evaluated key public officials every three years to determine their fitness for office. As individuals involved in a variety of outdoor programs we are concerned about the effectiveness of what we do both in terms of quality of experience for participants and in terms of economic viability. Sometimes we need to justify the value of our efforts to outsiders or to others within our own organization. Evaluation is one way of establishing or supporting the worth of our program. Toward these ends it will be helpful to more specifically define evaluation.

Evaluation as I will be addressing it in this article is a systematic, "formal" assessment of the quality and effectiveness of a particular program. A few additional words of clarification may be helpful here. Because of an abundance of negative baggage associated with the term "evaluation" there has been a widespread shift to the use of other terms which have a similar meaning but a less threatening demeanor. Review and assessment are several of the evaluation synonyms that have gained popular usage. Many individuals perceive the purpose of evaluation as finding out "what's wrong" and then using such information, usually in the form of immutable numbers ("You can't argue with the data") to embarrass and humiliate people into better performance. The idea, so the reasoning goes, is to motivate individuals or programs to do a better job by showing them how much room there is for improvement. Generally, however, this deficiency approach to evaluation is just plain demoralizing. Evaluation should not only be concerned with pointing out what could be done better it should also strive to highlight a program's strengths. *For our purposes then we will use the term program review interchangeably with evaluation to refer to the assessment of a program using specific and systematic procedures which result in findings that are useful to decision makers for the purpose of helping them better shape and achieve their goals.*

Purposes of Evaluation

Sergiovanni (1987) has proposed three categories to explain why evaluations should be undertaken and what primary purposes they. Quality control l- insuring program goals are being achieved in a manner consistent with program values and that outcomes or inputs which are unintended but positive or important are recognized.

Professional development - helping individuals involved in planning and delivering the program to grow personally and professionally by continually expanding and enhancing their own knowledge attitudes. Motivation of individuals involved in the program - building and nurturing motivation and commitment to the program and its goals. This includes the program's ability to take care of its employees.

Outdoor Programs conduct program reviews for many different reasons; field supervisors want to know what program elements are effective and which elements can be improved on; field staff want

participant feedback on their effectiveness as teacher, facilitator and outdoor leader; the board of directors is concerned about the thoroughness and effectiveness of safety procedures for both program facilities and field operations; the administrator is concerned about a new program's cost effectiveness. Additional reasons include those who want to discredit a program or conversely to promote it; either interest group may conduct a review as a means of justifying their particular action or position.

Determining and communicating the main purpose of a program review is essential to ensuring evaluation effectiveness. Because of widely disparate and sometimes conflicting intentions within an organization it is imperative for all stakeholders concerned to be clear regarding the actual purpose of the program review process. What do you want to accomplish or find out? How will the program review results help you in this regard? What form will the finished report take and who will see it? What resulting action will be taken and who will be responsible for implementation and follow up? Poor definition of purpose is a recipe for misunderstanding, resentment, defensiveness and general disregard for the findings. Ideally the results of a review will inform and influence decision makers, but in reality, to cite only one example, if the findings are not in keeping with the options of those who requested or required the review, the results may be conveniently misplaced for a few millennia and the desired course of action taken irrespective of the review results. Some of the purposes for a program review are categorized below.

accountability to:

- program staff
- participants/clients
- funding sources (government, private agencies, taxpayers, sponsors)
- governing bodies (government, school boards, professional groups)
- board of directors
- parent organizations

program improvement through:

- revising program goals and objectives
- increased recognition and understanding of successful strategies already in use
- assessment of intended or unintended outcomes (performance)
- more efficient and economical operation
- establishing or improving community contacts
- identification of staff training needs and desires.
- improving logistical procedures
- improving equipment selection, use and maintenance
- updating program content information or delivery methods

information dissemination

- networking with peers involved in the review process
- highlighting the effectiveness of a program

Methods of Evaluation

Just as there are many reasons for conducting a program review, so too there are many ways of conducting a review. Many of the formal and informal evaluation methods and data gathering tools used in outdoor fields such as experimental education have their roots in the field of educational evaluation. There are a great many *comprehensive* evaluation methods that can be used to conduct a review. Some are quite simple while others are unlikely to be used by any other than a trained educational evaluator and a specialist support team. There is a definite difference between statistics oriented, large scale evaluations focused on nationwide programs and conducted by trained evaluation teams and the less formal evaluation done by a program administrator of their own program. The latter however is closer to reality for most outdoor programmers. The challenge is to do the best possible program review with the available resources. The hardest to come by resources are usually time, money and trained evaluators. For this reason I have chosen to focus on a model of evaluation that is simple to use and easily adapted (see the accompanying model *The Program Review Process*). This model was developed primarily by Dan Cooney of Alberta Education and contributed to by a host of others including myself. It incorporates a variety of popular and widely used data gathering tools. It is a process I have used personally and which I find practical with a wide spectrum of programs and people.

Having stated my own preference and focus it is important to note that there are an amazing number of evaluation models out there and the curious amongst you are encouraged to consult the second edition of W. James Popham's witty and thorough text Educational Evaluation for more information.

Data Gathering Tools

Models are the *large scale methods* of program evaluation. The *smaller scale methods* are usually referred to as data gathering tools. They are simply a way of collecting information that can be analyzed. The review process may include many *data gathering tools*, tools which come in all shapes and sizes. Many of those listed below will probably be familiar to you in one form or another.

- participant observations
- review of documentation
- performance tests
- criterion referenced tests
- questionnaires
- interviews (recorded, videoed or written)
- individual (participants, instructor-teachers, administrators etc.) group
- instructor / teacher self assessments
- journal analysis
- site assessment
- at-task analysis
- instructional strategy analysis
- "in-flight" corrections

Conductors and Consumers of Evaluation

Much of the value of a program review has to do with who conducts the review and who requests or requires it. Listed below are some of the more common conductors and consumers of evaluation.

conductors	consumers
program director	staff
director and staff team	administration
outside experts	board of directors
peers in the field	funding sources
professional evaluator	government

Even when the purpose of a program review has been explicit the possibilities for hidden agendas are rife. No reviewer is a perfectly unbiased observer but the quality of the reviewer is mirrored by the value of the evaluation results. Especially when reviews are conducted internally but their results circulated externally there is the possibility of reviewers not seeing or reporting those things that might reflect unfavorably on the program.

Three factors will affect the outdoor of any review:

1. The purpose of the program review - if the stated purpose of a program review is ambiguous or a blatant misrepresentation of reality the results are likely to be worthless and unusable. Specific and manageable terms of reference generated collaboratively are the ideal.

2. Who conducts the program review - it is crucial to identify reviewers who can accomplish the stated purpose in an efficient and effective manner. They may be drawn from within the program itself, from peers outside the program or from some agency such as a department of education or a professional group (Hamilton, 1980; Duckett, Strother & Gephart, 1982)

3. Who will use the results and when - it is important that the reviewers understand not only the purpose of the review but also who it will be used by and when. If the final report will be used by the board of directors to make decisions regarding capital expenditures then they must receive the final draft with enough time to review it prior to their annual meeting rather than receiving it three days after the meeting is over. Likewise if the final report is to be used by paperwork swamped administrators it must be formatted in a way that makes it quick and easy to read but which includes enough detail to be useful for decision making.

Roadblocks in Evaluation

There are many potential roadblocks to evaluation. Identifying the most imposing of these before the review begins will go a long way toward alleviating problems down the road. Many times this is a matter of inclusion; including those individuals or stakeholders directly affected by the review so as to give them ownership and input. There is much less resistance to and fear of a review which people have had a personal hand in developing. Here is a starter list of roadblocks previous groups and individuals have identified as problems for them. No doubt you have a list of your own.

1. Time - When can I do it? I'm too busy.
2. Disruption of programming.
3. Fear among staff about intent - hidden agendas.
4. What is the payoff? What is the cost?
5. Who will benefit from the evaluation?
6. Others - add your own.

Timelines

Time lines provide a structure to help insure that a program review doesn't turn into a ten year project. In addition to a specific time frame for completion make sure that the individual or group responsible for a particular task is identified. Develop the time frame with careful reference to the program's operating time frame. For instance when looking at a mountain based adventure education program don't schedule field observations for the week of courses when staff are still getting used to one another and trying to determine how they "fit" within the program. Once again check your plans with the relevant stakeholders (field staff, administrators, teachers, etc.) to make sure you haven't overlooked anything major. Listed below is a sample time frame.

- Staff ratify terms of reference, evaluation process and time lines. April 15
- Review team established based on program input April 30
- Meeting with program members (staff, administration, board etc.) May 30
- Staff completes self appraisal June 15
- On-site visits and data gathering June 15
- Review team meeting to develop draft report July 1 August 1
- Draft report presented to program August 05
- Review of draft report and development of action plan by program August 15
- Discussion of report, necessary changes made and action plan included to yield final report which is distributed Sept 15

*This is a suggested time line. Dates may change depending upon availability of teachers, instructors, reviewers etc.

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference are data gathering guidelines which provide agreed upon parameters for the review process. They are also a statement of purpose in more specific terms. They specify what will be evaluated and by what standards. This can go a long way toward making the reviewer's job more manageable and as a result making the final report more relevant and useful. The terms of reference shown below were designed for the review of a school physical education program which placed an emphasis on outdoor pursuits.

A. Program

Are the "thrusts" of the physical education curriculum guides in place? e.g.;
Are the various dimensions being offered (aquatics, dance, fitness, gymnastics, individual activities and outdoor pursuits)? What is offered?
Is the movement approach being addressed at the elementary level? How is it implemented?
Is the levels approach being used at the secondary level? How is it implemented?

B. Planning

What statements are made regarding philosophy, goals, objectives, outcomes?
What instructional planning is in place? e.g. year, unit, daily documents, teaching resources.

C. Balance

What is the balance of time for activities offered in each dimension?

D. Instructional Strategies

What strategies are being used? Are they effective?

E. Student Evaluation

What are the criteria? Are they appropriate? How are they communicated? How are they assessed?

F. Intramurals

What activities, clubs, special days and self-directed activities are being offered?

G. Professional Development

What plans exist? How are PD experiences coordinated between divisions?

H. Work Environment

What are the arrangements for facilities, office space, showers etc.?

Program Review Tips and Strategies

1. Clearly state the purpose of the review. Set specific objectives. What is going to be reviewed and how?

2. Keep the number of things being looked at to a manageable level.

3. Selection and training of evaluation team members is important. Training should focus on the skills of planning, communication, observation, analysis, problem-solving and conflict resolution in addition to knowledge about and experience with the content area.

4. Feedback of a general nature is useless, e.g. "lacks organization". Be specific enough to meet the client's needs giving observed examples to illustrate your points.

5. Insure that the final report is presented in a format and manner that is useful to the client.

6. Timing is important. This is true for planning observations, presenting feedback and scheduling release of the reports to cite only a few examples.

7. Involve staff in the process of selecting the terms of reference and give them a say in the steps of the review.

8. Evaluators should strive to make the review process as collaborative between evaluators and program members as possible.

Conclusion

The program review process is a valuable and realistic means by which programs can assess specific aspects of their operation and thereby help chart their organizations move ahead. There are many purposes for doing a program review and many individuals or combinations of individuals who may serve as conductors of the review process. The conductors may come from within the organization itself, from outside or a combination of the two.

There are many methods that may be used to carry out an evaluation. The *Program Review Process* has been presented as a straightforward and adaptable method which can be modified to meet a diversity of needs. The process presented is not meant to be a research method tested for reliability and validity. Instead it is designed to be a practical and usable tool to aid individuals and organizations in finding out more about the program.

There are certainly limitations to evaluation. One reality in the world of evaluation is that of politics and hidden agendas. For this reason understanding and making explicit the real purpose of an evaluation is paramount to its effectiveness. This is not always possible and in such cases evaluation may be no more than a show piece that serves the interests of one particular stakeholder. Other evaluation limitations include lack of money, lack of time, poor timing, poor collaboration with stakeholders during the evaluation design, terms of reference that are too broad and ineffective evaluators. However, evaluation is also full of potential benefits and the *Program Review Process* is one method to help you construct and conduct an evaluation that fits your needs and resources. When used carefully it will greatly facilitate a well designed and conducted review. Good luck in your efforts.

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